The Revolutionary

Introspection and Extrospection

The figure of the youthful revolutionary, on the run from the police, torn from family and love, isolated even amongst his peers, uncertain of whether he would be able to live to see and share the future he was resolved to deliver, is an enduring image in the mid-century Hindi novel. It would seem that the high-drama of this life, in its intimate engagement with bare survival, precluded the time, patience, means, or even forbearance for reflection. However, this time of high stakes and anxiety turned out to be a rich ground for a renewed and severe introspection and creativity, leading to the transformation of romantic and domestic spaces as well. The trope of faith-under-duress was used by several canonical Hindi novelists, and indeed was a re-imagining of several fateful undercurrents of the nationalist movement.

The most familiar historical event of 20th-century India is its liberation from British rule in 1947, and Mohandas Gandhi (1869–1948) is the most commonly accepted architect of this liberation. Equally known is the opposition to Gandhian principles of non-violence from within the Indian freedom movement. The struggle against the British, from the last quarter of the 19th century, wrested continually with this moral issue of the legitimation of the limits of violence and dissent. It would seem to many today that by the last decades of the struggle (the 1920s to the 1940s), Gandhian non-violent struggle had won the moral and tactical victory. Yet, the popularity and moral legitimacy of Gandhi was continually challenged by several strands and figures. One of these strands was that of the popular underground revolutionaries who were hanged by British authorities. The foremost such figure was Bhagat Singh (1907–1931). There was widespread public outrage at the perceived refusal of Gandhi to mediate with British authorities over such punishment. Figures such as Bhagat Singh and his colleagues were mostly young men, but the movement also included prominent women who believed in, among
other things, the legitimacy of violence for the overthrow of British rule in India.

The question of violence did not stand on its own. Violence was often understood to be a symptom, and was grounded in many other fundamental political and social questions. The formulation of the question itself depended on the several disparate diagnoses of the declining or impoverished state of the polity, the character of moral self-sacrifice, and the varying (and sometimes contradictory) ends of the struggle that in India has always been called the "freedom movement." By the 1920s, the range of these questions was further enriched with the arrival of socialist thought which had gained ground in India following the Russian Revolution of 1917. However, this layer of socialist thinking floated on older layers of thought regarding questions of polity, sacrifice, ends and means, including the question of just violence. From the late 19th century onward, a certain strand of thinking which may be named "revolutionary" was charged with a deep sense of the injustice of colonial rule, an injustice which many believed legitimized the violent and total overthrow of Empire.

Arguably, the most systematic and far-reaching examination of all the political and moral issues involved were to be found in novels written in various parts of India. This book will confine itself to two languages, Bengali and Hindi, with much priority given to the latter language. The Bengali novel has a certain historical precedence as it was in this novelistic tradition that one can discern a continuous reflection on the ethics and meaning of the revolutionary figure. Themes from these Bengali novels influenced the early development of the Hindi novel up to the 1930s. Since then, the Hindi novel achieved autonomy in the treatment of the theme of the revolutionary. The Hindi novel went on to take the thematic into a highly innovative affective terrain.

This book seeks to study the development of this trope of the revolutionary in the Hindi novel as a laboratory for the elaboration of a modern, introspective, and extrospective subjectivity. Persecution by the State forced the youthful protagonist to self-reflect, often from within the confines of a prison. This self-reflection led to unexpected discoveries within the self of not just political desire, but also other desires, including romantic and sexual ones. The lifestyle on the margin of respectable society had resulted in these revolutionaries being unconventional in many ways, including in their socialization with other unmarried young men and women who too were political activists. Thus, in liminal sites like the prison, introspection led them to discover and unveil surprising motivations and existential self-understandings of both their past, as well as of their possible future. This in turn led them to return to the world after imprisonment with new ideas for social and romantic action that included, but also transcended, the narrowly political register of party politics. At a meta-novelistic level, such thoughts, experiences and actions led in Hindi to new modernist genres of novels and memoirs, which further required manipulation of form to convey this new depth and extent of affect beyond the frame of both conventional political dissent, as well as beyond the arranged and caste-appropriate marriage.

Thus, the aim of this volume is to ask the broadest questions regarding the cultural and ideological understanding of the achievements of revolutionary violence, a violence that the revolutionary claimed to undertake as the minimum required in a quest for justice, community and freedom. The rationale for violence is the hardest to articulate — and in choosing this thematic, any author pushes the reader to the limit of her moral consciousness. Yet the argument around violence is necessary, especially in times of grave unfreedom — the Hindi novels do not shrink from the mutual embedding of violence and freedom. This is a reflective violence (and a reflection on violence) directed against the optimizing violence that the State and the social world are believed to undertake on their subjects. And yet, in dealing with this external violence of the other upon self, the revolutionary finds himself/herself making unanticipated inner discoveries.

Symmetric to political freedom, the sexual too is rehabilitated from the adulteration of repressive convention, and the strangeness of abruptly liberated desire takes the subject into new realms of sexual and social self-making. Literature (and especially the novel-form) is a privileged site for this expanded notion of the political. Many revolutionaries and their allies turned to it, using it as a form of reflection and evaluation of their prior political beliefs. This reflection generated many insights beyond simply the validation or invalidation of their political past or means (such as violence, secrecy and publicity). Often, the process of reflection took them into unexpected domains as they sought self-understanding. In the solitude, the isolation, the humiliation, and perhaps boredom of prison, they came up with new meanings for their past. They began to question and search for answers in a newly-revalued childhood, in a new understanding of their relationships with their parents, siblings, school and college friendships, and perhaps above all, in romantic and sexual love. This revaluation in prison stayed with them so that when they came out of the prison, they were changed people not only because of the intrinsic
nature of prison experience, but because of their thoughtful new attitudes to social and sexual codes. They were thus doubly alienated — as the ex-prisoner for one, but also for the new feelings and attitudes that prison triggered vis-à-vis the rest of the world. The world suddenly seemed intolerably conservative with regard to the codes of interaction between the sexes. Prison had extended the domain of radicalization to include love. It is thus no surprise that only a capacious form like the novel could contain, articulate, address, and if required, polemicize, the entirety of their new existential world.

Thus literature becomes an opportune register for the elaboration of the political. It is in literature, rather than in the realm of the overtly political event (for example, the Civil Disobedience Movement), or academic political philosophy, or the political figure's oeuvre (say, Gandhi's Collected Works [2000a, 2000b]) that arguably the most creative, expansive and systematic detailing of the political took place. Is it necessary then to contra-distinguish the ontological facticity of history from literary characterizations when there are so many significant overlaps in terms of the narrativization and construction of both historical citizenship and literary subjectivity? This book aims to bring the novels of the three Hindi writers into a political frame casting light on the overlapping processes of the construction of both historically actual, as well as literarily imagined, political and narratological subjectivities. The elaborated form of the novel and the close readings offered here present an essential dimension of the revolutionary and provide a large canvas for a thorough introspection of the ends and aims of an expansive political citizenship.

The claims literature makes are as much about freedom and justice as about the aesthetic. On the one hand, perhaps the novel was allowed a latitude with regard to censorship that an overtly political treatise may not have been granted, especially in the war decade of the 1940s. But understood more amply, the novel had greatly extended the possibilities of the political into ever newer realms, such as sexuality, which (perhaps unexpectedly, perhaps not) appeared ripe for radicalization. It is hard to appreciate the enormity of this radicalism — for a non-arranged, companionsate marriage was itself a social form that had to be fought hard for in the previous decades. The earlier generation of novelists like the influential Premchand (1880-1936) had struggled to make the case through the 1920s for marriages based on the choice of the participants, and not on family, village, and caste considerations. And yet in the novels discussed in the book, written from the 1930s, the desire of the protagonists exceeds the simple proprieties of companionship and choice, and extends rapidly into the forbidden, the extra-marital, the quasi incestuous. This necessitates a further twist — extensive innovations in form, and the layering and multiplication of perspective. The novels move from the broad-canvas social realism of Premchand, to a plethora of forms such as the miniature novellette, experimentation with layers of framing, and the elliptical, impressionistic novel replete with temporal, semiotic and characterological shifts. There are new figurations of the child, of memory, of the domestic, of the inter-generational — and each is suffused with a vast but uneven and confused diversity of affects. There is a constant interplay of feeling and thought, of growth and faith, of skepticism and knowledge, of experience, and the possibility of constant self-deception. A modified and expanded version of Premchand's large-canvas social realism stays on in one of the novelists discussed, Yashpal (1903-1976), but even in Yashpal, this realism is infused with new themes of love and ever more militant characters trying to outdo each other in their self-perceived radicalism.

Literary Epistemology

This book intervenes in two influential contemporary debates. One is the broader study of the Hindi literary public sphere, pioneered by Vasudha Dalmia (1997). Later scholars such as Francesca Orsini (2002) and Charu Gupta (2002) have extended this study to different themes and decades of colonial India, most prominently the 1920s and 1930s. This volume supplements the work on the Hindi literary public sphere, with a focus on the novel from the 1930s to the 1950s. In addition to the slightly changed historical time frame, it also attempts a greater engagement with the specific mechanics of the narratological and subjective properties of the novelistic form in the hands of extremist political actors and writers. This is in contrast to the more generic notion of the novel that the concept of the public sphere yields — for the novel in a purely public sphere discourse pays more attention to the social relation of the novel to numerous other contemporary novelistic productions, rather than concentrate on the inner world of individual novels. Jürgen Habermas (1991) had himself warned against interpreting the idea of the public sphere too sociologically; he wanted to retain the sense of the active, historical, richly elaborated production of the social world, and did not wish to have the notion of the public sphere be misunderstood as a given, and thus passive and descriptive set (ibid.: 4-5). While the aforementioned scholars of Hindi literature are richly exhaustive in their use of popular and literary works and journals, such a quantitative, synthetic elaboration of the
public sphere must be complemented by an analysis of novels that interrogate, at a thorough, foundational level, the step-by-step mechanisms of action, thought, and the aesthetics of the age as it was being articulated in literary form. Such a foundational, internally systematized, developed and unified work is more likely to be, methodologically speaking, the roomy novel rather than the brief media or journal article.

Habermas’ ideal of the public sphere, the site for the free play of freedom, is one that is continually threatened — in temporal terms, post the 18th century, but conceptually too, it would seem that the public sphere can never transcend a mere conglomeration of amoral interest-seeking behavior, or be ever compassionate and yield voice and space, to less powerful groupings (Habermas 1991). The literary form of the novel, especially in the first-person format, brings to the fore this crisis of individual versus group interest, where morality hovers somewhere in between the individual (often in the name of freedom) and the group (often under the call of justice). The literary thematization of moral issues (implicitly and explicitly, narrowly or widely conceived) allows the moral to emerge from the material of the literary without transcending it. This book is not alone in making this claim for the essential inability of claims of freedom to transcend enmeshed social and political reality. Indeed, the autonomy of the grand political claim to freedom and emancipation is keenly contested — most famously in Jean-Francois Lyotard’s famous repudiation (1979) of grand narratives. Hannah Arendt has also argued that it is the 18th century that inverted the totality that is now called the “social,” but in truth this totality has led to a diminishment of a sense of freedom, as such a notion of freedom has been incapable of separating itself from the operated realm of necessity (Arendt 1958). While Hannah Arendt has acutely diagnosed the wide problem of freedom as being reduced to only a question of oppression/necessity, her nostalgia for the Greek world (or equally, her uncritical valorization of the slave-owning United States with its Revolution and Constitution, also of the 18th century) hardly provide convincing models for a wider realm or materiality of freedom. Yet Arendt’s work at least brings home the imbrication of the moral and the realm of necessity, though one may not share her contempt for this world of necessity.

The idea that the active moral or political world is inseparable from literary-epistemological and ontological concerns is congenial to much traditional and modern Indian philosophy derived from the Sanskrit tradition. The philosopher Bimal Kumar Matilal (1994: 279) has written of the “uncanny similarity between the pre-modern idea of the self and the postmodernist discussion of the same.” Later in the article, he explains: “Whether there is an enduring self or not [there is an agreement] that a perception of its true nature (which may be either a void or a substantial entity) is what adds the ultimate meaning, value and significance to our life, which otherwise appears to be only full of suffering, absurd and devoid of any value” (emphasis in original, ibid.: 291). Another prominent Indian philosopher, Kalidas Bhattacharyya (1958: 17), has also clearly stated that “the problems of classical Indian philosophy cannot be nearly formulated as ethical, metaphysical, theological, logical, psychological etc.” Traditional ideas of moral action included, and were derived from, many domains that would be considered purely religious or theological, or merely literary, today. The intellectual historian Nicholson (2011: 74) writes:

Much of the bias against the Puranas [ancient narratives] . . . seems to be motivated by the fact that the Puranas are mythological or literary texts and therefore are not philosophically rigorous. This idea of the separation between poetry and philosophy seems to be an unwarranted influence from the Greek tradition . . . it is demonstrably absent among pre-modern Indian thinkers.

Perhaps Nicholson overstates the case a little here — the realm of the purely literary (kavya) was separable from the purely philosophical realm of say a Buddhist or Nyaya (logic) text. But the larger point holds — many texts, like the aforementioned Puranas, were not identifiable as purely literary, or philosophical, yet carried great weight and authority for both. This pattern continued in the medieval period. To pick one example, one may quote from history writing in medieval south India: “the world-view was a pervasive one, embracing such diverse areas as sexuality, political philosophy, and the emergent notion of a public space which operated according to a set of unwritten but shared rules” (Rao et al. 2000: 116).

Thus, there was no epistemological priority of history or literature or sexuality — they were all embedded in mixed texts. The priority arose from certain texts being seen as more authoritative than others (the arch and normative authoritative text being the ancient hymns called the Vedas). The reasons and processes for some texts achieving greater authority than others is ultimately mysterious. It might be possible to speculatively trace a given text’s slow elevation to canonization over historical time through shifts in patronage and intellectual networks (Lingat 1993; Olivelle 2009). Such a sense of the richness of a literary-embedded
authority articulating moral action in diverse historical periods is what distinguishes Pollock's *The Language of the Gods in the World of Men* (2006). It is the power of authoritative texts that is a key determinant of historicizability, even if, as secular historians it might be felt obligatory to try to invert that relationship of authority and historicizability. It remains a methodological problem to decide if a given historical epoch functions as the exclusive necessary pre-condition for the generation of a given text.

Or is it the other way around: does the moral universe of a text shape the contours of its historical horizon? Why a text might abruptly rise and equally abruptly fall in authority after several centuries of dormancy is difficult to determine even if one can describe the sequence of events leading to its ascent and decline. Nor can historical determinism prove that a given text is dead for good and will not ever rise again to moral pre-eminence. Pollock's work is undoubtedly the most innovative and synthetic account of language and genres in several decades, yet it needs to be extended to the major developments in medieval literature and philosophy. A fuller account of the imbrication of moral thought and literary analysis, especially the hemeneutics of schools such as the *Mimansa* (investigation), would only be harvested by a full analysis of the inner-logic of the various *dharma-shastras* (sciences) with their interlocking commentaries and sub-commentaries. These commentaries must then be understood in their further interaction with literary conceptualizations of various forms of poetics including that of kingship (McCrea 2010). Literary affect cannot be located in any particular person but in the interaction of persons, events and classes—affect is what is shared across even power differentials, and these include the various characters within the play or poem, as well as the audience (Ramanujam 1974: 397-408). The literary-epistemological force of the most influential of narrative genres such as that of the Puranas and their commentaries helped articulate a hybrid moral-literary-epistemology that carries weight in India till today. Traditionally, the king was conceptualized simply as a super-householder (Cox 2010). This fundamental idea helps one understand how the modern revolutionary conceives of himself naturally as both politically and sexually sovereign. It is a return to an older idea of power-in-the-world that precedes the modern public (politics) versus private (domestic/sexual) divide—Arendt has already been discussed in this context of the invention of the modern, diminished idea of the political.

It is also in this traditional idea of the authoritative, but hybrid pre-modern text—neither purely literary, nor philosophical, nor political, yet influencing all—that a model can be found in the contemporary world for the texts written by a Gandhi or a Bhagat Singh. The literary world of the novelists responded, expanded and developed many of the questions and formulations raised by these authoritative texts. This book uses an experimental methodology that allows the rich interaction of various kinds of disparate texts—historical and literary, each with their several genres and governing concepts. Thus, the experience of reading about, or understanding, the revolutionaries, requires the surrendering of traditional categories of the public and the private, of the political and the sexual, as distinct and demarcated domains that might latterly interact, but are fundamentally not collapsible into each other.

Traditional ideals of moral action in India extended easily to the more identifiable domains of social and domestic sites, the domain of the king, as well as those that would be alien today. A pot or a cow were said to have their own *dharma* (the traditional Sanskrit word for "moral action"), and dharma could also encompass the possible variants of dharma that may accrue in time of personal or social emergency (Bhattacharyya 2010: 42-59). Thus moral action had the structure of being embedded in as wide a personal and extra-personal space as was conceivable. It could not be reduced to formulae (or even a desire for such formulae) that would hold good across time and space and individual. Rather, the thrust in Indian philosophy was on describing a variety of situations whereby the entire moral framework had to be continually introspected and reworked in the world. Indian philosophy has been criticized for not maintaining an autonomous domain of moral or political philosophy. In apparent contrast, political philosophy has been present in the West since Plato and Aristotle—the latter called political philosophy the “queen of the sciences” in his *Politics* (Aristotle 1996). However, instead of criticism of the Indian tradition, the effort to retain an embedded textual-epistemological calculus might be best appreciated today in this age suspicious of grand and autonomous moral claims.

**South Asian Historiography and the Figuration of the Revolutionary**

The second debate that this book engages with is the historiographical account of this period especially by scholars like Irfan Habib (2007) and Sumit Sarkar (1989) who seek to understand the driving force of the emergent cultural consciousness as deriving purely from the ideals

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1 See also the Translator's Notes in Bhattacharyya (2011).
of violent revolutionary socialism. The appeal of Habib and Sarkar, and cultural historians like Partha Chatterjee (1986) and Ashis Nandy (1994), is that they still formulate the political problem at the level of the polity as a whole. This book tries to make the case that the notion of the political presented by these scholars is not extended enough and does not include the rich embedding and mutual enrichment of the political and the epistemological, especially via the literary domain. Yet the idea of the polity as a whole is at least consistent with the way the revolutionaries framed the problem. In some contrast, the dominant trend in current historiography is to critique the claims of any totalizing polity (whether this totality is conceived of as nationalism or socialism or even revolution). This critique is achieved using the axes of class, the rural, the subaltern, minority religions, caste, gender, and so forth. But such critiques will not be able to give a full account of historical agency (especially in the first half of the 20th century) when the agents certainly believed in these totalities. Further, discourses of oppressed margins are at risk for failing to account for the normative, and attractional, power of centralizing totalities, and are thus in danger of endlessly echoing the selfsame fact of oppression and marginalization. Arendt remains the most powerful Western critic of this reduction of politics to the monotone of necessity. Further, her work also insists that the revolution cannot be entirely captured by the appropriations of the Right or the Left, for they both formulate the problem in terms of necessity, even if they have different notions of whom the primary agent of history is. Her work has direct reference to the question of the revolutionary for who better represents the inner division of aggressor/oppressed than the revolutionary in both the silhouette of holding the smoking pistol as well as the silhouette on the prison wall. For this book also, the study of revolutionaries helps break some of the impasse of freedom/necessity by studying the interaction of grand totalities with figures manifestly from the margin — the prison is by definition the most direct and blatant margin of governance, and the prisoner is necessarily excluded in the way no marginalized totality of "class" can be.

As stated, this sense of morality embedded in varied epistemological and social concerns is prevalent in thinkers who wished to move the debate of freedom away from the overly grand claims of the liberatory projects of post-Enlightenment Europe. Arguably, this mass-liberatory project might be said to include Indian nationalism which was clearly inspired by European ideas of revolution and freedom in so many ways. The liberatory claim for Indian nationalism is perhaps the last and the greatest of the Enlightenments in that it claimed (and indubitably did achieve) a certain kind of liberation for so many people. This might be the hardest and dearest liberation for many to give up, whether they be Indian or Western scholars or citizens. But this book argues that the truer freedoms were at their most fertile when they moved away from the grandiosity of the nationalist movement (with its larger-than-life figures like Gandhi, Jinnah, Nehru, and Bhagat Singh) and into the inland introspective world of the injured prisoner, who then, critically, as extrospection, reflects and writes (or novelizes) his condition, coming up with new ways of imagining his self and his world. Thus, novels need to be written (and read) from the other end of the ostentatious liberatory projects that took place in the glare of the idealized Habermasian public sphere. In that other end of darkness, of solitude, of the rust of the prison bars — analysis begins with the minimum speakable, the minimum audible. It is from this cell that the novel must be seen as emerging in its first firm, encumbered, extrospective claim. For the fully visible, audible, crowded and busy ideal of the public sphere (with its claims to rational discourse and enlightenments) does not acknowledge the extent of its entitlement. The political prisoner locked in his cell is not allowed to appear, or be heard or published in the public sphere. Even if a court allows him to speak, the court remains closed to the general public. Faced with such enforced silence (or the bare solitary speakable), many revolutionaries preferred to be silent and not argue their case (or write their novel), thus trying to bring attention

undertaken. I have tried to take a step in this direction with the controversial Vinayak Damodar Savarkar (1883–1966), an important figure absent in this book (Govind 2011).

4 There were of course many brave women revolutionaries throughout the first half of the 20th century. Yet the large majority remained male, and this book is constrained to record it thus by choosing to use "he." But more importantly it is especially in the reflection of these themes such as differential gender limitations that the novels and writings of the revolutionaries take the reader to a new imagining of the achievements, as well as the concrete constraints, of both the nationalist and the revolutionary moments.
to the farcical nature of such quarantined justice. For them, speech and writing were acts of deeply constrained moral freedom, and for a reader to read such works is qualitatively different from reading an essay in a newspaper or journal for the latter are sanctioned spheres of thought, action and aesthetics.

Thus, descriptive, historical accounts do not solve the moral question of the legitimacy of actions that might include violence (and self-reflection on violence). Peter Heehs (1993) offers an exhaustive account of the rich tradition of the Bengali revolutionary; his work centers on events like the Alipore Bomb Case and the first-hand accounts of figures, chiefly the influential revolutionary and litterateur Aurobindo (1872–1950) who was most active as a revolutionary in the first decade of the 20th century. Heehs’ thorough and detailed account however does not extend beyond Bengal, and he does not seek to theorize the richness of the political as it engages with other kinds of morality (such as sexual morality). As this book demonstrates with regard to the Bengali and Hindi novels, the political was embedded in several other domains, and could not be conceived of as autonomous. It is the roomier, fleshier novel, in the absence of the elaborated political treatise, that must serve as the foundational exegesis of moral action. The section on Bengal also draws from the insight of Ashis Nandy (1994) in bringing together the two specific Bengali novels — *Anand Math* (Chatterjee [1882] 2005), translated as the "The Sacred Brotherhood" and *Pather Dabi* (Chatterjee [1926] 1993), translated as "Right of Way." — of the revolutionary, thus allowing, for the purposes of this study, a schematic historical continuity to be assumed from around the 1880s to the 1920s. Since this book is chiefly concerned with the Hindi novel, its analysis of the Bengali literary milieu is relatively perfunctory. However, even given this perfunctoriness in terms of the complex, intervening 40-year historical period, the book does engage in a close narratological analysis within each of the books in terms of the formulation of revolutionary subjectivity. More than most scholars, Nandy does recognize the horizon of violence as it proliferates, engulfing every intimate aspect of the individual and her household, thus, as it were, socializing violence. One must be violent even to defend oneself, to light up the submerged ubiquity of violence — all reflective justification for revolutionary violence is ultimately grounded in self-defense and self-respect. Bhagat Singh functions as an intermediate figure between the period of the Bengali and Hindi novels — Christopher Pinney (2004) has pointed out the pervasive presence of Bhagat Singh in popular visual memory even up to the present.

Many moral actions become perceivable only in contrast to these sanctioned courses, stakes and values of mainstream mass-nationalism. The chief limitation of the mainstream nationalist movement was that it elevated the claims of an abstracted notion of the mass-political over all the other realms. While the failure of nationalism to transcend differences like religion, caste, gender, class, and such-like have been ably commented on, its inability to engage the realm of the personal, the affective, and of the smaller inter-subjective scales of friendships, love, family, the school and college, and so on has been insufficiently commented on. The political aim of national freedom became too dissociated from experience, such that only the most token participation was required. In the Hindi novels discussed, dissociated nationalism is typically represented as a walk with thousands shouting identical, simplistic slogans that commoditize anticolonial outrage and grievance. In contrast to this alienation, a deeper and more imaginative morality sought to link thought, action and affect more closely. This more imaginative morality could also be called nationalist — but it seems the term has outlived its explanatory power even as a concept worth attacking. Perhaps an extension of the term "nationalist" can asymptotically reach the revolutionaries' values — this book is less invested in trying to capture morality by naming, and more in articulating the several different and newer terms that emerge out of paying attention to the revolutionary’s writings. So it matters little if it is preferred to call the revolutionaries the last, or truest, or greatest nationalists, or to emphasize their discontinuity from the mainstream movement. Perhaps the 1920s can be seen as the last decade where the dream of an older, unified, inclusive nationalism was last dreamt. It is not a coincidence that so many diverse key figures were utterly disillusioned by nationalism by the end of the 1920s — Jinnah, Ambedkar, Bhagat Singh among many others. It is equally not a coincidence that so many of the influential historical works have been on the pivotal decade of the 1920s (Amin 1995; Pandey 2012).

The Hindi novelists discussed in this book wrote in the aftermath of this decade's melancholy failures of unification. The novels emerged in the aftermath of the failed 1920s, from the introspective womb of the prison, but eventually, by virtue of being literature, they also came to be extraporative public meditations (even if they contrarily thematized the need for more private freedoms). These novels greatly expanded the realm of freedom — or perhaps, they rehabilitated earlier traditional, and fuller, notions of freedom that incorporated romantic and sexual desire. There were thus newer elements and materials for an expanded conceptual
architecture of freedom. These elements in their relation were articulated primarily in the linguistic materiality and locus of the novel-form.

In this different movement of morality the still live elements of the earlier Sanskritic models of literary philosophy — those that emphasized the symmetries and mutual dependency of the moral and the aesthetic — are revitalized. Yet, all this talk of Sanskrit and failed unity brings up the question of the more obvious influence on Hindi — Urdu. The costly disentanglement of Hindi from Urdu has been lucidly discussed, and eloquently mourned, in the scholarly literature (King 1995; Rai 2001). That this disentanglement was both aesthetically expensive (in that it led to a severing of the great tradition of the 18th- and 19th-century Urdu poetry) as well as politically expensive (ultimately, not just the historical event of Partition, but also the regressive return to a dead Brahminic or upper-caste tradition) was made by many. In this list of complainants is included the Urdu poet Firaq Gorakhpuri — or, to use the name he was born with, Raghupati Sahay (1896–1982). Firaq was not against Sanskrit perse (he had written fluently regarding his pride in his Sanskritic legacy with its “nectared accent”) but he was against the overly Sanskritized usage of Hindi in the Chayavadi (literally, poets of the shadow) generation; the chayavadis were the dominant Hindi poets of the 1920s and the 1930s (Gorakhpuri 2011: 178). The relationship of Firaq to later poets like Agyeya (1911–1987) and Mukti Bodh (1917–1964), who were often Sanskritic in diction but clearly took poetry to new formal vistas, is one of the many unexplored questions of North Indian literary genealogy and discursivity.

The specific question of aesthetic lineage in matters of the novel-form is a different task that requires a more detailed and neutral analysis. Sanskrit has been mentioned as a model for a certain kind of literary-epistemology, but of course traditional Sanskrit had little to offer by way of the novel-form. Could the Urdu novel then be a model for the Hindi novel of the revolutionary? This does not seem to be the case for novelists such as Jaiendra (1905–1988) and Agyeya, who both have written of the far more decisive Bengali influence. Agyeya translated Tagore’s (1861–1941) Gora, but it is Saratchandra Chatterjee’s (1876–1938) Shrikanta that is arguably more important for Shekhar. There was clearly more investment in the themes and characterizations of the Bengali novelistic tradition than the relatively under-developed Urdu novelistic one. To make a point from the examples above it could be claimed that Shekhar re-politicized Shrikanta, even while its undergrowth remained the sumptuously emotive male subjectivity of Shrikanta. There is a recursive dialog between romance and politics, with romance being foregrounded at one time, and at other times politics. This can happen within the novel, as well as between novels — my work makes the case that there is a move from the political to the romantic in both Jainendra and Agyeya, but there is no necessary reason that the move could not happen in the opposite direction, and indeed does often seem to happen when compared to the Bengali tradition. Few of these comparisons can be meaningfully developed vis-à-vis the Urdu novel — the novel in Urdu, likely because of its proud and resonant poetic tradition, remained inhibited till the second half of the 20th century.

This is not a competitive account-keeping of novelistic development — it would not be controversial to say that at least for the thematic of the revolutionary the Bengali tradition was more influential. This influence is directly discussed in the Premchand–Jaiendra letters in Chapter 3, but should also be clear from the elucidations and innovations in themes that this book is concerned with — such as the romantic and social figuration of the revolutionary. The usefulness of explicating such lineages is to open the question of novelistic figuration to the maximum plausible range of specifiable aesthetic and historical influences. It is inarguable that the Bengali trio of Bankim (1838–1894), Tagore and Sarat (known throughout South Asia by these shortened names) had a particular normative power due to their having been translated early, and having been widely, eagerly and consistently read, perhaps up to today. Historical contingency (for a wide variety of reasons ranging from the longer history and type of Bengali colonization with its creation of a cultural elite based on distorted rural taxation, to later cultural facts such as the global valorizations, and travels, of Tagore as elder statesman of literature due to his Nobel Prize) no doubt played as much a part in this influence as considerations of literary merit. But this is secondary to the ambition of this book; what is important here is to trace out certain figurations and their development in the Hindi novel. Among Indian languages, Hindi is taken to be distinct. Its geographic range, the vast demographics involved, and the claim to be India’s national language give the Hindi novel a self-evident salience.

Lastly, the mistake must not be made of taking the revolutionaries too easily to be of any given narratological or political persuasion (such as socialism or nationalism) even if some writings indicate this. Indeed, it is not clear what makes a revolutionary a revolutionary — is it a faith, or an action, or an understanding, or a diagnosis, or a commitment, or all of these prospectively or retrospectively? Or is the fragmentation between
these terms their existential moment, their balance of introspective cogitation and expository commitment? An identity like socialism is a totality they would likely shrink from even as they may lie in its thrall in a moonlit prison cell — or it may be an idea they are perpetually crouching toward, the lone star seen (or hallucinated) from the dungeon, the night of vision and pain that the Hindi novelist Agveya wrote about, echoing many other texts and confusions. Most insistently though, the novelists analyzed in this book require of themselves that they understand their predicament, and understand how they came to be in their present state of dread and unfreedom. The fact that some socialist or nationalistic ideas may have been present in the works of certain revolutionaries does not explain the motivation, or the internal variations, of their oeuvre. For their political world is itself something growing and expanding in its meaning and implications — the world grows as they grow. This ceaseless recursivity, and unbalancing, of thought and belief in the writings of many of the revolutionary figures is at odds with simple teleological assumptions regarding the realization of the true lit path of socialism or nationalism. What this book discovers is that it is hard to dis-embed the question of present consciousness entirely from older, persistent layers of revolutionary thinking on questions like violence and moral subjectivity — the prisoner is a web of questions and doubts, going back and forth between old and new ideas. If there is one image that has held this book together, it is that of the prisoner (Bhagat Singh as well as the protagonists of many of the Hindi novels), ceaselessly reading and writing, filling his jail notebooks until they overflowed, his desire and imagination (of both the past and the future) spinning new geometries for the self, filling his mind with thoughts of a freedom that was trying hard to accommodate an ever expanding plenitude of demands and desires.

Chapter Organization

Chapter 1 discusses the origins of the revolutionary sentiment and ethos in Bengal. It begins by evaluating what is arguably the foundational text for the figure of the revolutionary — Bankimchandra Chatterjee's Anand Math published in 1882. Several of the themes that resonate continually in the revolutionary archive are already inaugurated and developed in Anand Math, a novel which recounts the sananyasi (renunciant) revolution of the late 18th century. The revolutionaries are called "children" in the novel. Instead of a reflex psychoanalytic hypothesizing, what is also in balance in this term is the rhetoric of absolute devotion, loyalty and love to the Motherland as it is being conceptualized in the time in the novel. In the 1880s the idea of freedom as being an entity that is intimate and valuable, and as a Mother, was not something that could be taken for granted — indeed this lack of faith is what the children-order constantly chastize the lay-citzenry with.

The novel invests a historical kernel of a 100-year-old rebellion with the strongly anachronistic notion of the nationalism of the 1880s. This polemicized articulation is perhaps not surprising, for a trans-regional nationalism was not a given at the time of Bankim's writing. The Indian National Congress, the first official, nationwide representation of the interests of colonial subjects, was formed in Calcutta only in 1885 with the help of the Scottish official, Allan Octavian Hume (1829–1912). It was conceived as an explicit safety valve against the disaffection of colonial subjects. Indeed it is a difficult question of civic science to understand what Indians were at this time — they were not citizens in the contemporary democratic sense of being able to vote, nor did they have fundamental or human rights guaranteed by a Constitution. They did exist however as loose associations of bodies advancing varying kinds of interests. In the case of many members of Congress, this was to chiefly ask for greater representation in government bureaucracies, especially the powerful Indian Civil Service (Seal 1971). It is in this milieu that the address of Anand Math can be better appreciated. In the novel, the totality of the motherland is being addressed, a totality both in terms of temporal spread (the sequential whole of mother as she was, is, and will be) but also, perhaps more significantly, in terms of the demand for individuals and groups to sacrifice everything, including if need be, their life for this cause. It is significant that the geographic spread and determinations of this mother as Motherland is not yet available, but rather, the mother is conceived in the older quasi-religious sense of shakti (power). Even the famous hymn "Vande Mataram" ("Praise to the Mother") sung throughout the novel images the Mother as luxuriance, abundance and power, rather than geographical. This hymn can be contrasted to the later influential hymn of Tagore's, "Jono Gono Mono" ("Thou art the ruler of the minds of people"), first sung in Calcutta in 1911, that became the national anthem of India, and which appropriates a geography for the nation by naming and emphatically itemizing it.

In Anand Math the rebellion is led by a group of renunciants — a leadership of Bengali Brahmins, who expect that at a propitious moment in their fight against tyranny, thousands of erstwhile apathetic "Indians" will enlist. There are clearly violent invocations against Islamic rule, and
secular apologists for Bankim believe that Islamic rule serves as a proxy for current British rule as he, being a civil servant, could not afford to alienate his masters. The chapter does not speculate on Bankim’s motivations or alibis. It is rather concerned with how he constructs the ideal and field of a revolutionary. The Children are not born warriors — it is clearly stated that they have left the life of the household for the cause of the Mother. It is also to be interpreted as a sign of their disinterestedness in political or material power that they insist on renouncing governance after their battlefield triumphs — as Gandhi wished to do at the moment of Independence. There is much paranoia that secular power can only corrupt — there is no positive image yet of rulership, whether by oneself or by another.

Thus, a revolutionary is one who sacrifices the intimacies of the conjugal household and the agricultural labor of the farm, for the work of a likely martyrdom. This martyrdom is for a notion of Motherland that is simultaneously being abstracted and polemized for. The Mother has not become a definitive contemporary motherland yet. The description is more derived from classical Sanskrit imagery of verdant forest rather than an identifiable geography of the late 19th century — or the late 18th century, the internal time of the novel. The novel is also able to internalize criticisms of this fabrication of the Mother. There are skeptics represented within the novel who question every premise — be it the morality of the sacrifice of the conjugal and traditional duty for an abstracted notion of Mother, or the more pragmatic assumption of whether a band of Children, bound by courage alone, can take on the might of an entrenched military Empire. There is also a clear economic impetus to the actions of the Children — the famine. But the emotionality of the response is determined by a sense of the violation of the Mother, and of ubiquitous political tyranny more generally. Though jurists like Dadabhai Naoroji (1825–1917) had, in as early as 1876, written the Poverty of India, the purely economic history of Indian decline, agnostic of an autonomous concept of moral and political tyranny, does not find representation in Anand Math. Rather, one has the notion of a privileged revolutionary insight into a history that is beyond the scrutiny of any social science. This is familiar to readers of Walter Scott (1771–1832), the Scottish novelist whom Bankim deeply admired. As Ian Duncan (2007: 253) writes of Scott’s revolutionaries: “Typically he flies across unknown country, falsely accused of treason, unwittingly shining the plight of those on the wrong side of historical power, his agency aloof from the meaning of events (yet expressing their essential, deadly truth) as he invests it in the pure motion of escape.” Equally, as in Scott, as also in many of the Latin American national romances, this universal trope of the revolutionary requires that he be rarely alone in his escape and indeed has a love interest that complements, nourishes, and validates his struggle: “What better way to argue the polemic of civilization than to make desire the relentless motivation for a literary/political project” (Sommers 1991: 27). The international variations of the revolutionary semiotics are beyond the scope of this book — however, the universality of the trope may be called to attention as a site of future research.

The chapter seeks to memorate the contribution of a recognizably continuous Bengali novelistic tradition of the revolutionary from the 1880s till the 1920s before the focus of the book shifts to the Hindi novels as the latter picks up the threads of this tradition. In attempting to bring the revolutionary tradition up to the 1920s, the chapter ends with a focus on a prominent novel of Sarat, another widely influential Bengali literateur who also intensely mediated on the question of the revolutionary. The point of the chapter is not to establish the continuity, staggered or otherwise, of the revolutionary tradition as a whole in Bengal per se, but rather to discuss certain persistent motifs of the revolutionary subject and his or her values as they appear paradigmatically between the 1880s and the 1920s. The motivation is to bring out salient thematic clusters with reference to the trope of the revolutionary — both the validation of the moral charisma of the revolutionary, and the internal critique of that moral charisma from within the novels themselves.

Chapter 2 demonstrates the bi-directionality of literary and political discourse with reference to the figure of the revolutionary. It traces the life of the most famous of the revolutionaries in public imagination — Bhagat Singh. The chapter traces his growth in a family that was no stranger to revolutionary ideals. On a larger scale, Punjab was an especially charged province as it had a long history of martial values, including historical opposition to British rule from the 18th century onward (the British finally conquered the region in 1849). Punjab was also the province that was the most brutally exploited by the colonial government in the First World War in terms of recruitment for service on European battlefields. Globally, the First World War inaugurated the assumption by the State of an almost permanent stage of emergency powers, including the right to assign treason to several newly conceptualized forms of dissent (Agamben 2005: 19). The British made special use of these emergency powers when they did not give satisfactory representation to Indian interests even after
their success in the First World War. There was also the new ideology of mass communism on the horizon after the Russian Revolution of 1917 that frightened colonial powers to an even greater degree. The older generation of revolutionaries like Manabendra Nath Roy (1887–1954) began to interpret the triumph of the Russian Revolution as a harbinger of worldwide communism. To that generation’s earlier dream of stitching together a scattered, semi-armed and semi-trained vigilante revolutionary army, there was now the added powerful and overarching motivation of a coherent ideological and internationalist explanation of the arrow of history. Such ideas affected Bhagat Singh and his revolutionary army. And yet the national context remained paramount. It was his frustration at the disbanding of Gandhi’s Non-Cooperation Movement due to an outbreak of violence, and later, the state-sponsored assassination of the Congress leader Lala Lajpat Rai (1865–1928), that spurred Bhagat Singh to political violence. The chapter studies his intellectual evolution and the interaction of his many nationalist interests (including the ideal of a multi-lingual polity) with his moral evolution (over questions of suicide, violence and secular martyrdom). The chapter then goes on to discuss Gandhi’s similar concerns with moral questions as opposed to the Congress’s more legalistic stance that utilized crowds and masses for the purely utilitarian purpose of extracting concessions from the British. Gandhi and Bhagat Singh, though different in many ways, shared a similar need to ground and explain their rhetoric in detailed and individuated moral terms quite distinct from the abstracted Congress rhetoric of a generalized justice for the generalized masses. Hence they both profited from being forced into the introspections, and the socialities of the small inner-group — be these small groups the residues of his “Army” in Bhagat Singh’s case, or the elite cadre of satyagrahis (literally, “graspers of truth”) in Gandhi’s case. The self-reflections and intimacies of these groups were consolidated in the social site of the prison. It is not surprising that Gandhi wrote his autobiography in prison in these very years of the 1920s. He too, like Manabendra Nath Roy and Bhagat Singh, wondered if he was not being egotistical (Gandhi 1927). Self-narrativization of those deeply involved in politics did not come easily, as it seemed like an obvious competition between personal and extra-personal political value.

It was in the Hindi novel of the 1930s that the personal-political novel came to be articulated in its multi-axial form. Jainendra Kumar wrote Sunita in 1935. In Sunita, the character of the revolutionary, Hariprasanna, remarks that the storm that had overtaken the country only a few years earlier had passed. He was referring to the hanging of Bhagat Singh and the public outrage it engendered (Kumar [1935] 1955: 28). Yet the revolutionary, though now criminalized, disbanded and on the run, nevertheless had that old desire to “touch eternity” (ibid.: 30).

What is significant in this confession, couched though it is in the grandiose terms that were familiar to readers of Sarat’s Pather Dabi, is that despite such a desire, the everyday life of the revolutionary is one of constant agitation and self-doubt. The external world of the predatory police mirrors his internal world, a world that oscillates between grandiosity and self-doubt. This differentiates the subjectivity of Hariprasanna from the earlier Hindi novelistic tradition. Subjectivity needs the cracks of doubt to smuggle itself in — the revolutionary characters in Anand Math and Pather Dabi were too armored against self-questioning. When doubt needed to be represented it was in the shape of an external character — hence the earlier Bengali novelistic tradition had resolved itself into characters who either never devolved into self-doubt, or remained permanent skeptics, or still others who were simply educated into the “truth” of the those who never had self-doubt. In historical actuality it remains a question of how much someone like Gandhi was really willing to be changed by a skeptical interlocutor. From his Collected Works (Gandhi 2000a, 2000b) it seems that his days of self-doubt were resolved in the 1890s and the first decade of the 20th century — his only real interlocutor seems to have been the Jain poet Raichand Bhai (1867–1901). Bhagat Singh however seems to constantly evolve in his thinking, continually synthesizing new ideas — his voluminous reading and note-taking in prison testify to this.

However, the twist in Sunita (Kumar [1935] 1955) is that it is the encounter of the revolutionary with the household — that supposedly safe space in contrast to the prison — that precipitates the confusion in the mind of the revolutionary. Simultaneously, Sunita, the eponymous character of the novel, develops from a life of desultory widly domesticity into that of a subject of illicit desire. This illicitness is represented in the novel not by her yielding to the revolutionary, but by her being seduced by the equally illicit prospect of secret, fantastic revolution. There is a clear debt in Jainendra’s formulation of this seduction to the Tagore’s 1916 novel, Ghare Baire (“Home and the World”). However, unlike Tagore, Jainendra does not editorialize. Tagore’s novel ([1916] 2005) ends with a clear indictment of the revolutionary and his need for violence. In Sunita, Jainendra avoids didacticism and Tagore’s coerced ending and
viliﬁcation, and allows instead the full and confused play of desire (Kumar [1935] 1955). Revolutionary subjectivity allows no simple closure, and instead is suﬀused with an aﬀect of sexual excitement and loss, a sentiment with which the reader is in sympathy, unlike Tagore’s novel where the subjectivity of the revolutionary is foreclosed by aural interventions that explicitly discredit revolutionary (here, extremist swadeshi) ideals. Sunita makes it plainly impossible to return to the simpler moral world of the Gandhian, or even Tagore’s, monogamous asexual household. Sunita disallows further moralisms — it critiques the rigid, violent, ascetic revolutionary (who is celebrated in Anand Math and Pather Dabi). It also critiques the norm of the punished hypersexual, violent revolutionary of novels like Ghare Baire. This punished, hypersexual revolutionary has its antecedents in minor characters in Anand Math and Pather Dabi. In both these novels this ﬁgure is punished to make way for the ideal of the detached, charismatic leader. In Ghare Baire, the hypersexual, violent character is punished to favor for Tagore’s ideal of “non-violent” morality of a rural landed class. Sunita avoids the simple vilification of sexuality or violence, presenting both these axes as part of the protagonists’ (male and female) horizon of self-exploration and freedom. In narratological terms, Sunita is more focused on plot than the development of the aﬀective subjectivity of the characters — as the literary scholar Theo Damsteegt remarks of Jainendra’s early work: “In most of these stories the narrator is clearly present, and there is an emphasis on actions, plot and climax that is lacking from the psycho-narration stories, while character-bound focalization is found in scattered, individual passages only” (2004: 53).

It is in his next novel, Tyagpatra (“The Resignation”) (Kumar [1937] 1980), that Jainendra masterfully integrates plot and aﬀect. The novel reﬂects the necessary impossibility and confusion of moral judgment in its highly compressed narrative of a beloved aunt who slips down the moral and social scale by leaving the household to live with a low-caste man. This is even as each slippage unveils the resilience of her moral power that exposes the hypocrisies of the upper-caste and middle-class household. In this sense, the beloved aunt, like the externalized and ostracized revolutionary, serves as the Archimedean point that challenges the ground of social and individual moral authority. This challenge cannot be met within the moral universe of the late nationalism of the 1930s. It is this realization that under-girds the melancholia of the novel and makes certain that the malaise already present in the 1930s, and expressed in the idiom of sexual and ﬁlial relation, will haunt Hindi literature for several decades. It is a common but inaccurate sentiment that it is the disillusionment of the post-1947, post-Partition era, represented by the Naiy Kahan (New Story) movement in the 1950s that comprehensively explored the fraught, anomic relationship between the sexes in modern, urban settings. In truth, the problem of sexual and marital incompatibilities was fully articulated by the 1930s. Hence one must disagree with the following, commonly believed and inﬂuential formulation: “During the Independence Movement, a person breaking away from traditional society and religious codes could still feel the excitement of attachment to a cause which offered the promise of a better economic, political and social order” (Roedder 1968: 247). The Hindi novelists discussed in this book — Jainendra, Agyeya and Yashpal — all realized by the 1930s and 1940s that even the success of the Independence Movement did not offer the ability to cohere the many competing and contradictory dimensions of social, sexual and political freedom. Yet, at least the open articulation of weakness, disappointment, doubt, and shame testify to the growing literary and political conﬁdence of the Hindi novelists in creating a more deeply developed characterology.

Chapter 4, chiefﬁy devoted to the ﬁrst two novels of Agyeya, explores his inheritance of Jainendra’s work — not only in terms of the general thematic, but also in its formal and narratological conditions. Like Tyagpatra, Agyeya’s ﬁrst novel Shekhar ([1941, 1944] 2001) begins with a childhood already vitiated by violence — the mother in both novels is not a nurturing ﬁgure, but one who is petty and violent in Tyagpatra and untrusting and contemptuous in Shekhar. The fathers are remote and do not emotionally protect the children or relatives from the violence of the mother. One does not need the revolutionary to abruptly bring an external violence to the household as in Sunita or, as will be discussed in the last chapter, Yashpal’s contemporaneous novel of the 1940s, Dada Comrade (“Respected Comrade”) ([1941] 1967). Rather, the violence of the household in Shekhar (Agyeya [1941, 1944] 2001) nurtures the boy-revolutionary. The daydreaming, constantly questioning child seems to be an only child even though he does have siblings. What distinguishes him is his painterly eye for natural beauty, especially that of the mountains of both southern India and the Himalayas. Some of his solitariness is eventually ameliorated in his friendships in college, and these friendships often occur in the context of his keen sense of social injustice in caste-ridden Madras in South India, and later, in the more direct sense of militant
anti-colonialism in Lahore. Though Agyeya took a simpler, bolder political line by being associated with Bhagat Singh and his Army, in the novel, the slow precipitation into politics seems to occur in the same dream-like state of consciousness with which the narrative represents his childhood. Unlike Hariprasanna in Jainendra’s Sunita, there is no extensive articulation of the appeal of the revolutionary life. In Sunita, Hariprasanna is initially represented as a renunciant in the culturally loaded manner of the characters of Bankim’s Anand Math. Shekhar however does not seem to have a clear self-consciousness of either the renunciant figure or the vehement anti-colonial figure of Bhagat Singh’s Army. Instead, he ends up in jail the first time without seeking to — but he does not resist either. Though he meets several knowledgeable figures in jail, it is clear that the only relationship of profound value to Shekhar is with his “cousin” (the exact relationship is unspecified) Shashi. Shekhar involves the married Shashi in his political actions and at the end of the novel Shashi dies in an almost sacrificial manner, unable to bear the strain of the life of constant pursuit by the police. Thus, a novel that began as the self-narrativization of a political prisoner ends as a love story with an exorbitant sense of loss and melancholia — reminiscent again of Jainendra’s Tyagpatra. In Agyeya’s second novel Nadi ke Dweep (“Islands in the Stream”) ([1951] 1997) these themes are re-enforced. Although the novel was published in a newly independent India, and has much to say of the prevalent opportunistic political milieu (even of the supposedly idealistic communist variety), the affective hub clearly lies in the radicality (and entailed pain) of the female character’s sexual choices and lunge for freedom.

Chapter 5 focuses on the memoir, and some of Yashpal’s novels of the 1940s. Yashpal was the most politically involved of the writers studied in this book. He was a close friend of Bhagat Singh and integral to the Hindustan Socialist Republican Army. He grew up in the conservative school milieu of the Arya Samaj — an important Hindu revivalist organization of the late 19th century that sought to purify Hinduism by returning to the ideals of the oldest extant tradition of the Vedas. In practice, the Arya Samaj was influential because it built an extensive network of schools that, over time, taught modern and traditional disciplines and did so in a puritanical atmosphere of absolute devotion to the gur (teacher). Yashpal rebelled against this, and, like Agyeya, became further radicalized in Lahore where his path crossed with Bhagat Singh’s. He was jailed for several years and was only released on grounds of health due to the pleas of his wife (herself a prominent revolutionary) in the 1930s.

The novel that made him widely known was Dada Comrade, published in 1941. The novel charts the evolution of the protagonist’s political thought from atomized violence to a more international worldview of the polity that is increasingly enunciated in the communistic idiom of class-warfare and the need for union-led strikes and bargaining power (Yashpal [1941] 1967). This does mark a shift from the older anti-colonialism represented by the elder characters in the novel whereby the anti-colonialism is precipitated by a fierce sense of visible injustice that the British perpetuated — a historical example is Bhagat Singh’s outrage over the police brutality that led to the assassination of the respected Congress leader Lala Lajpat Rai, and a literary example is the murder by the police of the family member of the protagonist Sabyasachi in Sarat’s Pather Dabi. In contrast, by the 1930s and 1940s, anti-colonialism rhetoric was not centered on personal outrage, but in a global-historical diagnosis of colonialism as impersonal economic exploitation. As the historian Ranajit Guha remarks of these different notions of insurgent anti-colonial violence:

Two types of violence are clearly distinguished in one important respect. Unlike crime, peasant rebellions are necessarily and invariably public and communal events. To generalize, the criminal may be said to stand in the same relation to the insurgent as does what is conspiratorial (or secretive) to what is public (or open), or what is individualistic (or small-group) to what is communal (or mass) in character (1999: 79).

Yashpal’s oeuvre represents exactly this attempted transformation from the criminalized, small-group revolutionary army to the more broad-based discourse of mass-nationalism expressed in an increasingly socialist accent. Yet the mechanism of this transformation has not been explored in the historical scholarship of this period. This book attempts to move the literary and historiographic debate from the subject of mass-nationalist national identity — be it the large-group identity of Hindu or Muslim, peasant or capitalist — toward the different analytical axis of the individual and the small group, whereby, using literature as a comprehensive tool for introspection, a different accounting of political and narratological subjectivity can be isolated and synthesized.

It might be said of Yashpal’s oeuvre, in contradistinction to Jainendra’s and Agyeya’s, that the romantic aspects do not overwhelm the political, and that the two elements are held in mutually beneficial, narratively productive, tension. His many novels written during the 1940s and 1950s
echo the array of anti-colonial political positions available in India and
the merits and demerits of each. Importance is always given to the many
dimensions of freedom beyond the narrowly political, such as sexual and
literary freedom. In Yashpal, there is likewise the continuity of genres. It
seems to make little difference if it is a novel, a memoir, or a short story.
The moral clarity of Yashpal’s imagination is transparent, perhaps overly
so, in contrast to the overt thematization of the intrinsic relativity and
ultimate unknowability of moral values in the works of Jainendra and
Agyeya. Yet all three Hindi writers add something essential to the unfold-
ing conversation in the late nationalist India of the 1930s and 1940s as
well as in the (largely continued paradigm of) post-Independence 1950s.
They all affirm that the imagination of, and faith in, political freedom is
indissociable from the narrativizing of individual and social introspec-
tion and affect. This imagination and faith is articulated chiefly through
the novel-form, and it is in the novel, as deeply informed by its historical
moment, that a deeper insight into that historical frame can be concep-
tualized.

To repeat in brief, Chapter 1 starts with an analysis of the early ideolo-
gizations of violence as found in Anand Math. The novelistic tradition
that concerns itself with the moral question of violence continues well
into the 1920s, setting leitmotifs that re-emerge continually in the fol-
lowing decades, as evidenced by the influential 1926 novel Pather Dabi.
The second chapter deals with the competing moralities of Bhagat Singh’s
brand of violent socialism and Gandhian non-violence. The question of
competing moralities is then taken up by the Hindi novelistic tradition in
the 1930s. The remaining three chapters of the book are concerned with
three Hindi novelists — Agyeya, Jainendra Kumar, and Yashpal — whose
work explores the lives of revolutionaries branded as advocating violence
by both the colonial state as well as mainstream Gandhian nationalist tra-
ditions. These three Hindi novelists, though not self-consciously a group,
know each other, as well as revolutionaries like Bhagat Singh. The pro-
tagonists of their novels live lives on the run, as they find themselves
pursued by colonial authorities. Their political radicalization resulted in a
wider and more multi-dimensional radicalization (which included sexual
relations), and this in turn required the rise of new literary forms such as
the first extensive autobiographies and memoirs in Hindi literature. These
novels also include the first articulations of the complexities of romantic
relationships beyond the normative “arranged marriages” that so charac-
terized Indian society, and which both women and men of those decades
sought to escape in pursuit of new ideals of romantic and sexual love and
freedom. It is arguable that the dilemmas of the period covered in the
book — political as well as interpersonal — are key to understanding
Indian society even up to our contemporary historical moment.